

THE AGE OF SHARING BY NICHOLAS A. JOHN (CAMBRIDGE, POLITY, 2016)

FANNI BÁRSONY¹

The term ‘the sharing economy’ has recently appeared in the social scientific literature to describe an influential and competitive business model that is no longer a niche trend, but is becoming a relevant and widespread model for both social and economic activity. Companies such as Airbnb² and Uber³ are some of the most well-known businesses that are positioned under the umbrella term ‘sharing economy’. Other on-line platforms that provide peer-to-peer services are rapidly expanding around the globe. Smaller-scale initiatives, such as tool libraries, time banks, and co-housing projects, might not currently have major financial power, but are increasingly influential actors in modern economic life. Though the ‘sharing economy’ is the term most commonly used to describe practices in which peer-to-peer services are exchanged, connected consumption, collaborative consumption and platform economy also occur, and are often used interchangeably.

The different kinds of businesses considered part of the sharing economy are associated with complex economic, regulatory, technological and social issues. A growing number of sharing economy businesses provide alternative services that fulfil a variety of consumer needs but often come into conflict with existing regulations and with the interests of established business actors who provide the same or similar services. There is an increasing economics literature that includes research designed to measure the impact of the sharing economy on economic growth (the effects of sharing on traditional service providers is a common subject of study). Beside impacts on productivity, such research also

1 Fanni Bársony is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Sociology, Corvinus University of Budapest. E-mail: barsonyfanni@gmail.com

2 Airbnb is a lodging site: Individuals rent out rooms in their own homes, their entire homes, or other properties they own. <https://www.airbnb.com/>

3 Uber is a company that operates a mobile application which allows consumers with smartphones to submit requests for rides to drivers who use their own cars. <https://www.uber.com/>

examines how the sharing economy influences consumption patterns and fuels practices that promote environmental consciousness, solidarity-based consumption and more personalized exchanges. When it comes to the social aspects of the sharing economy, reputation and trust are the concepts most often discussed. Due to the fact that transactions often take place between strangers, none of the sharing economy platforms can operate without a sufficient level of trust between actors.⁴ Thus sharing solutions may require some level of trust, but to what extent they contribute to the formation of trust and other forms of social capital is an interesting question. Some initiatives promote sociability and advertise themselves as places for meeting people, making friendships, and growing a community.

There exist both more optimistic and rather critical narratives about the sharing phenomena of our times. According to the former, actors have the conscious intention to contribute to creating fairer, more sustainable and socially more connected societies. The latter perspective is skeptical about whether these businesses truly represent alternatives and questions if they are really less interested in growth and profit maximization than their traditional competitors. Some argue that businesses such as Airbnb are more concerned with economic self-interest than sharing, while other forms of sharing have often been described as predatory and exploitative too.⁵ The question is also raised whether the actors in the sharing economy are driven by utopian goals or rather by purely rational economic behavior, meaning they are simply looking for cheaper alternatives to conventional services.

This narrative of the sharing economy is rooted in the term ‘sharing’ which is often associated with positive and symbolic meanings and values. These features are the roots that Nicholas A. John explores in his book. The author, an assistant professor at the Department of Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, holds a PhD in Sociology and Anthropology, and in earlier publications mostly dealt with the diffusion of global technology. His first book, *The Age of Sharing* (published by Polity) is an ambitious attempt to theoretically and historically analyse and contextualize the concept of sharing. This work is in line with some of his previous attempts to investigate

4 Schor, J. B., Fitzmaurice, C.: (2015), “Collaborating and Connecting: The Emergence of a Sharing Economy”, in Reisch, L. and Thøgersen, J. ed., *Handbook on Research on Sustainable Consumption*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, available at: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/sociology/pdf/SchorElgarHandbook.pdf, viewed: 14 January 2016.

5 Schor, J.B., Fitzmaurice, C.: (2015), “Collaborating and Connecting: The Emergence of a Sharing Economy”, in Reisch, L. and Thøgersen, J. ed., *Handbook on Research on Sustainable Consumption*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, available at: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/sociology/pdf/SchorElgarHandbook.pdf, viewed: 14 January 2016.

the impact of digital technologies on interpersonal communication and the private sphere.⁶

John is now extending the scope of his investigation by looking at sharing not just as a value or means of organizing a new economic segment. Throughout the whole book he argues that sharing is more than just the common practice of exchanging goods, or social interactions, but is an important keyword and a metaphor for our times. The values attached to sharing are not only influential in the digital-media dominated capitalist economy, but serve as an important organizing principle for many non-economic human forms of interaction. This in-depth and reflective approach of John's makes the book of interest to any sociologist or economic sociologist who seeks to interpret social and historical processes and the value- and ideological components underlying the increasing presence of sharing in public discourse and the different spheres of life.

The author distinguishes three spheres in which sharing has become an organizing pattern: it is the main activity on social media platforms, a model of economic behavior, and a way of communicating, especially in therapeutic discourse. Although the author underlines that sharing is a term that refers to different social forms of action, and we use it in different contexts with completely different meanings, there is a link between the narratives which is due to the set of values attached to the act of sharing. These values include openness, honesty, mutuality, equality, empathy, equality and trust. These are the links, in John's view, that make sharing a positive and ideal social behavior in contemporary societies. One source of the positive associations, as John argues based on his extensive literature review, is that sharing things with our fellows is a pro-social behavior: from our early childhood onwards we have a natural and universal inclination to share. The act of sharing is presented by the author as a social activity that has always existed, although sharing as a communicative act is a relatively new phenomenon (talking about our own troubles, emotions and intimate relationships became important only in the first half of the twentieth century when caring also became associated with sharing). Taking a historical perspective, the even more obvious contribution to the current practice of sharing occurred due to digitalization and the spread of the internet which established the technological background for online sharing.

Since the internet was created, argues John, its use has involved activities that are associated with collaboration, cooperation, connectivity and communication. Since the early 2000s, social media sites made sharing a core element of interaction between users. John holds that sharing evokes ideal

6 CV of Nicholas A. John: http://nicholasjohn.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/nicholasjohn/files/curriculum_vitae_nicholas_john.pdf

values that can make the lives of people in the digital area more human and communicative. What he questions is whether social media sites are genuinely or rather purposefully using the word 'sharing' due to its positive connotations. John critically elaborates how social media actors promote sharing to encourage users to provide information which they can easily sell to third parties. Though John is certain that social media sites use the concept as a marketing tool and create mystique about the idea of sharing to make a profit, he does not doubt that what users actually do relates to sharing and building relationships.

The concept of sharing is described by the author as a collection of social practices linked with positive values that provide an alternative to the functional, impersonal relations associated with capitalism. The motivation to share and the behaviors that the aforementioned positive values make manifest can help build trust and a sense of community, and result in more authentic forms of communication. Sharing appears as a "Zeitgeist" (op cit) which is fuelling ideal human relationships based on communality and collaboration, and also motivates people to communicate in a more open and honest way and increases the level of self-expression in the public sphere.

John's key message is that the reader should distinguish between the ideal concept of sharing and actual human transactions that are labelled as sharing. The former incorporate the desires of modern people for mutuality, connectivity and a sense of community, whereas the latter are influenced by commodification that is no less exploitative and alienating than the structures that the idea of sharing attempts to resist. John is also certain that it is disappointment with commodification and marketization that feed the desire for a more trust-based and communal society, as well as for the expression of critiques about practices that do not represent the true value of sharing.

Also shared – in John's perspective – is the pattern of organization in the sphere of communication and in therapeutic culture in the form of the transition towards greater intimacy and self-expression in the public sphere. The author distinguishes between an increase in the appearance of sharing in therapeutic discourse and in social media. The two fields are treated separately in his analysis, and his argument is that sharing has appeared in both as an important concept, supporting the idea that sharing is the comprehensive metaphor for our times. Eva Illouz dealt with similar phenomena in 2007 in her influential book in which she introduced the concept of "emotional capitalism"⁷. Her key message is that we live in an emotional culture, and similarly to John, Illouz thinks that the division between the public and the private are no longer relevant since

7 Illouz, E. (2007), *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Oxford, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 134 pp.

personal emotions and motivation appear everywhere, even at the workplace and in economic relationships. In the new culture of emotionality, Illouz also dedicated an important role to the language of therapy and psychology, but in spite of emphasizing the motive of sharing, she highlighted the concept and pattern of communication. It is the new communicative competence – according to Illouz – that shifts the focus to personal emotion, motivation, and self-expression. Sharing can be seen as an important source of motivation in Illouz’s communicative model. Her findings do not contradict John’s arguments, but perhaps clarify some links and place a somewhat different emphasis on John’s distinction: the emerging importance of sharing as a communicative act has similar roots and drivers in the world of social media and in therapeutic discourse, while sharing is more about distribution when it comes to the sharing economy.

In his book John brings social media, therapeutic discourse, and peer-to-peer transaction-based production and consumption together using the concept of sharing, and suggests that sharing is a process that occurs within the language and which has ignited these three semantic fields. His analysis is thus linguistic, and in some places relies on discourse analysis and other less well known qualitative methods (e.g. text corpus analysis). Throughout the book he seems to relax this methodological rigor and focus, which also raises questions.

Being an expert in the field of communication, the author still claims to be using his “sociological imagination”, and without referring to any sociological concepts or citing sociological theorists addresses a number of phenomena that have been (or could be) the object of sociological investigation. When it comes to the reason for the spread of sharing in the production and consumption of goods, John’s focus is restricted to the effects of digital technology, thereby neglecting the other common explanatory factor that connects the rediscovery of exchanges based on mutuality and reciprocity caused by scarcity; namely, the recent economic crisis. I assume that this factor should also appear in the narratives. It would have been interesting to explore if economic necessity and cultural change can explain the phenomenon of sharing, and how they are related to each other.

The author does not usually fall into the trap of romanticizing the concept of sharing, although in some parts of the book he tends to focus too much on the bright side and the “ideal society” approach to sharing, thereby neglecting phenomena that have been proven using empirical studies. Viewing social media sites as places where people freely express their emotions, and not considering the saliency of individuals’ need for validation and affirmation by a network is

one example of these biased interpretations.⁸ He also makes claims about the ability of the sharing economy to build social ties and maintain connections, although some empirical studies have proven that transactions between strangers enabled by sharing platforms are not necessarily durable (lasting only for the time of the transaction) and thus cannot be compared to real connections.⁹

When it comes to the motivations behind and conditions for people's participation in sharing action, John's focus is on the counterculture effect and on the natural inclination to share things with others. However, we may also find it necessary to consider other potentially neglected factors (such as trust and reputation) that are probably preconditions for interaction.

John refers to sharing as a universal phenomenon in our lives, and from reading the book we may obtain the impression that sharing is part of a common global culture and something that everyone can benefit from. This may be true if we think of sharing as a communicative and not as a distributive act, although access to social media is not equally distributed among people of different social status. The problem of inequality is even more relevant in terms of participation in sharing economy transactions. John seems to ignore these considerations, although all relevant research has proven that people who have access to the most advanced technologies are more likely to have an interest in the sharing economy. The sharing economy, in fact, can be said to have an elitist character and its platforms tend to involve the activities of well-educated and relatively well-off consumers. In spite of the fact that sharing economy services are said to offer low-cost alternatives, they are not necessarily utilized by people who have low incomes.¹⁰

The Age of Sharing is an important book and is recommended to anyone who is seeking to understand more about the values and historical development behind the concept of sharing. The author fulfils his goals and stays focused on the interpretations and meanings of sharing. He also convincingly proves how sharing has become a core value and way of thinking in three different spheres of contemporary life. The book can be seen as a semantic analysis; furthermore, due to the rich set of citations from various fields, it has an interdisciplinary character and can serve as a reference point for different disciplines. This review

8 Bazarova, N.N., Choi, Y.H., Cosley, D., Sosik, V.S., & Whitlock, J. (2015), Social Sharing of Emotions on Facebook: Channel Differences, Satisfaction, and Replies. Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (CSCW '15). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 154-164. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2675133.2675297>

9 Möhlmann, M. (2015). Collaborative consumption: determinants of satisfaction and the likelihood of using a sharing economy option again. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 2015 Vol: 14 (3), pp. 193-207. doi: 10.1002/cb.1512

10 Idem.

has placed emphasis on the issues the book raises from a sociological point of view, but claims that some of the main assumptions could be refined and confronted with some findings from sociologists. If we accept that sharing tells us a lot about our 21st century lives, it would also be interesting to compare the similarly important keywords and metaphors of earlier times to understand how they can help us predict the influence and durability of sharing in our everyday interactions. It is a question whether the book is written to address a scientific audience or the wider public. In my opinion, John's book is an interesting but not easy general knowledge book about sharing that helps the reader to reflect on an important phenomenon of our times. It could also be used as an interdisciplinary introduction to the topic of sharing and a good starting point for deeper scientific investigation.